

## The Balkans as a 'Laboratory (for the Study) of Illegal Markets'

### *Introduction to the special issue on 'Illegal Markets in the Balkans'*

It is impossible for one interested in 'organised crime' and illegal markets to ignore the area of the Balkans. Particularly since the beginning of the 1990s, when 'organised crime' replaced communism as the 'threat' against the western world, the Balkans began to be viewed as a source, transit and destination area for migrating 'organised criminals' and as an integral part of a global nexus of illicit markets. This is exemplified, for example, in the statement that "[t]he Balkans have become the gateway to Europe for organised criminals... Criminal gangs are behind a multi-million pound business smuggling people, drugs and guns...", issued at a 2002 London-held international conference focusing on the 'threat of organised crime' in the Balkans co-organised by the then British Home Secretary David Blunkett and Foreign Secretary Jack Straw. In addition, the Home Secretary stated in the conference that these Balkan criminal gangs are "more organised" than the police (BBC News, 2002).

However, compared to other contexts, there is relatively little known about illegal markets and 'organised crime' in the Balkans, despite the abundance of programmes, initiatives, and organisations existing in the area about and the generous funding invested on these issues. Most of what is already known is looked through the prism of official discourse, which is influenced by (often imposed) ideologies, sensibilities, interests and objectives (see Papanicolaou, this issue), and is very often embellished with an apocalyptic tone. Woodward (2005: 9) notes that "while the grey literature...is huge, serious research is remarkably thin... uncritical ...characterised more by journalistic approaches, oft-repeated anecdotes, and dramatic summaries of dangers to persons and states without much conceptualisation or empirical evidence...". In addition, the necessary data, and meaningful and reliable information for an analysis of illegal markets and 'organised crime' in the Balkans is either fragmentary and scanty or largely unavailable to researchers (see, for example, Hysi, 2004). This special issue of *Trends in Organised Crime*, having 'Illegal Markets in the Balkans' as its theme, attempts at contributing in the counterbalancing of this trend, a notably ambitious task since once the mainstream/official discourse gains a momentum, it is extremely difficult to eradicate.

The Balkan Peninsula is an area of about 550,000 km<sup>2</sup> and a population of about 55 million. It is a strategically located, ethno-linguistically diverse area on the edge of Europe, which has been considered the border between Europe and Asia. It constitutes an East-West passage and the area where some of the main Pan-European Corridors that support transportation of goods and people exist, converge or cross each other. It is a territory with some largely homogeneous countries and others in which there is an uneasy symbiosis between distinct ethnic groups. Such diversity is an integral part of the political geography of the region. Historically, 'the Balkans' has had negative connotations for Westerners and has been perceived neither as Asia nor, however, as Europe. Rather, they have been seen as a terrain for lawlessness and disorder, and violence underpinned by exotic, archaic, customary, informal codes of conduct regulating everyday life. A hotspot of inter-ethnic conflicts, roaring nationalism(s) and conflicting visions, the Balkans have been, as William Sloane (1914) put it in his seminal work published shortly after the (first) Balkan Wars, a "laboratory of history". Balkan people have been coupled with varying degrees of negative perceptions of their ethnicities, and their societies have been perceived – by

the ‘westerners’ – as culturally atavistic, an image that was revived and reinforced in the last decade of the twentieth century particularly for the Western Balkans.

Despite the apparent and sometimes important differences that exist among them, countries in the Balkans share a number of common features, which, in turn, are directly or indirectly linked to the contemporary existence of illegal markets in the area. One of these features is the long tradition of smuggling and illegal markets, despite the view expressed in the relatively recently published report by UNODC (2008) that illegal markets and other forms of ‘organised crime’ in the area are a legacy of the troubled 1990s. Illegal markets have long been an important element of the economic fabric of the Balkans. When most of the Balkan Peninsula was part of the Ottoman Empire, the imposition of different customs zones by the Sublime Porte, differential taxations among territories, the prohibition of trade in precious metals and occasionally of other commodities such as copper, as well as the soaring prices for everyday commodities such as bread in times of war (Malcolm, 1998; Lampe and Jackson, 1982), created all these conditions for the flourishing of illegal markets from the sixteenth century onwards. Illegal marketers from the Balkans even extended their business beyond the Balkan area. During the French Revolution and the ‘Napoleonic exclusion’, for instance, Greek schooner owners and sailors defied prohibitions and introduced into several European ports commodities whose prices skyrocketed (Theodoridis and Lazarou, 1981).

During the Cold War illegal markets of various commodities and services, and of various sizes, existed in the region (see, for example, Irrera, 2007; Antonopoulos, 2008). Later, and since the late 1980s, the Balkans have been faced by economic, social and political crises. Apart from inefficient and/or inadequate methods of state and social control, the transition to a market economy from an economy that was based on state planning, and generally the economic restructuring in those Balkan countries that were part of the former Eastern bloc, resulted in financial uncertainty, limited opportunity structures, shrinking employment routes and persisting unemployment, low productivity, price liberalisation and inevitably the reduction in the purchasing power of the people (see Gjipali *et al.*, 2004), something that has made people in the Balkans “highly sensitive to price” (Marinov, 2005: 13), and made them turn to the informal economy. In addition, significant events such as the war accompanying the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia, the UN and Greek embargoes on Serbia and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM)<sup>1</sup> respectively, instances of mass killings and senseless brutality, the collapse of the financial pyramid schemes that sucked in citizens’ savings in Albania in 1997 and the subsequent riots in the country, the inter-ethnic conflict in Kosovo in 1999 and the NATO bombing of Serbian targets, the inter-ethnic conflict in FYROM in 2001, have all had a direct or indirect impact on the Balkan countries and their people to a varying extent. Very importantly, all these conditions led to an environment in which ‘criminogenic asymmetries’ (Passas, 1999) were highlighted, and (tolerated or even politically sponsored) illegal markets became the norm whereby “distinctions between licit and illicit commodities became increasingly academic” (Lewis, 1998: 219). Although there was a period of economic growth with increases in the GDP, decline of inflation and the accession of new EU member states from the area of the Balkans that allowed for all Balkan markets to be geographically close to the European Union markets, this has not been enough to counterbalance the long and painful period of

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<sup>1</sup> The terms ‘FYROM’ and ‘Macedonia’ are used interchangeably in this special issue depending on the authors’ preference.

economic decline (Stanchev, 2005). All the aforementioned conditions have had a serious impact on the establishment and consolidation of illegal markets in the area, where entrepreneurs emerged as 'service providers' (Ruggiero, 1997: 27), and allowed the legitimisation of activities that existed in the pre-transition period (Feige, 1999).

In addition, because of the geopolitical position of the area the Balkans emerged in the 1990s as an important transit and destination point for masses of (undocumented) migrants from Asia and Africa. Simultaneously, there have been a large number of migrants *from* the Balkan countries *in* the Balkans and the West. The nature of migration for some countries has been such so as to allow authors to define specific Balkan countries, and most notably Albania, as "a laboratory for the study of migration" (King, 2005: 133). The migratory patterns have resulted in the supply of a large number of (undocumented) individuals, who have been supporting the large informal economies in the Balkan countries (reaching 30-45% of the countries' national GDP, see Schneider, 2005) and Western Europe. In addition, migration(s) resulted in large diasporic communities from the Balkans sometimes providing for a link of illegal marketers between the Balkans and counties of the West, and at the same time highlighting and magnifying fiscal inequalities between sending and receiving countries.

Finally, but very importantly for the current special issue, the Balkans are characterised by high corruption, which is socially acceptable. Although there have been significant improvements in some countries such as Romania and FYROM, Balkan countries - with the exception of Slovenia- scored relatively low in the 2007 Transparency International *Corruption Perception Index* (Transparency International, 2007). The large informal economy and high levels of corruption in Greece, the only Balkan country that has traditionally been seen as part of the West, yet it displays a number of (fiscal and social) features of transitional countries, justifies von Lampe's (2005: 410) claim that "it would be false to generalise and to make a simple distinction between the countries of transition on the one hand and the established democratic countries in Western Europe on the other".

All the above features and developments have internally affected (parts of) the social organisation of already existing illegal markets. One such example is the diversification of main drug routes from East to West and the transformation of some Balkan countries to drug *production* countries. In addition, these features have led to the development of illegal markets that were largely unknown before 1989. Currently, as Hozic (2004: 42) suggests, the Balkans are

"a transit zone, an area where laws are temporarily and selectively suspended to ensure proper circulation of goods through the international state system... ..the Balkans now serve as a giant, semi-regulated (or at least government-protected) off-shore territory where products that would otherwise have difficulties entering European or western markets get recycled, laundered or refurbished, and then brought (back) into the West".

The 'normality' and social embeddedness of illegal markets in the area has been stitched even on the Balkan people's cultural fabric such as, for instance, some of the Greek *rebetika* songs celebrating smuggling.

The authors of the articles appearing in this special issue of *Trends in Organised Crime* were invited to provide an account of the *social organisation* of illegal markets in this particular area; either on individual countries in the Balkans or the Balkan area as a whole. Despite the abundance of *general* writings on illegal markets, the issue of the 'organisation' of these markets as well as other activities that

can be defined as ‘organised crime’ or ‘cross-border crime’ is, according to Passas (2002), largely neglected. It should be mentioned however, that this special issue is neither an exhaustive compilation of articles on *all* illegal markets that exist or existed in the Balkans nor an exhaustive compilation of illegal markets from *all* Balkan countries. It is primarily concerned with a number of illegal markets that are either under-researched altogether or under-researched in the area of the Balkans specifically; markets that are however, an integral part of the Balkan (illegal) market jigsaw, which, as we shall see, often extends beyond the Balkans (see, for instance, Arsovska and Kostakos, this issue; Gounev and Bezlov, this issue). While the emphasis is on the social organisation, theoretical issues are also of great importance here.

The contributors in this special issue take the readers by the hand and give them a tour through the Balkans. In the first article Marina Tzvetkova explores the emergence and evolution of private protection in Bulgaria from 1989 to 1999, with emphasis on the market for extra-legal protection. This market turns out to be an important sector of the Bulgarian economy since, according to UNODC (2008), by 2006 it employed 9 per cent of the male working population of the country. Within the unregulated context of private protection, especially during the former part of this transition period, Tzvetkova looks into the emergence of the *silovi grupirovki* (‘groups that use violence’), ‘mafia-like organisations’ in Bulgaria, that were not only involved in activities that bordered on extortion but also in crime, violence, corruption and even dictated – directly or indirectly – trends in other illegal markets as well as prices of several commodities. This link between security services, ‘organised crime’ and illegal markets can also be found in Russia as well as other (Balkan) countries such as Serbia (see UNICRI report excerpts, this issue) and Romania (Hajdinjak, 2002).

In the second article, Jana Arsovska and Panos Kostakos focus on the illicit arms trafficking in the Balkans from the beginning of the 1990s until 2007. Major relevant developments such as the wars that led to the break-up of the former Yugoslavia, a development that dramatically affected the particular illegal trade in the area (and elsewhere), are salient here. Attention is also paid to the Kosovo crisis and role of Albania (and Albanians) in the arms trafficking nexus. In their article the authors distinguish between different, yet interlinked ‘types’ of this illegal market; namely, profit-oriented arms trafficking, arms trafficking towards the arming of formations that drift between *criminality* and ‘terrorism’, and (illegal) arms trafficking, which is sponsored by the state. In addition, Arsovska and Kostakos urge the reader to challenge the basic assumptions of the economic model of ‘organised crime’ and to consider the non-economic elements that play an important role in the arms trafficking business.

Georgios Papanicolaou explores human trafficking and the sex industry in Greece, which underwent a cataclysmic transformation since the mid-1990s, as the country became a destination point for migration flows. The author alarms the reader about the trafficking of human beings rhetoric that has been introduced into the Greek context, and offers a counterbalance to the volume of one-sided research and literature on the particular topic. Papanicolaou informs us on the Greek campaign against human trafficking for the economic exploitation of one’s sexuality, how this campaign has shaped perceptions about the sex industry in the country and how it has influenced legislation by blending human trafficking, prostitution and ‘transnational organised crime’ into *one* conceptual nexus. The author identifies a powerful discrepancy between human trafficking discourse and the limited – yet crucial –

available ‘evidence’ and empirical indicators about trafficking in the country, and urges the reader to pay attention to the obfuscated processes of exploitation of migrant labourers in Greece, which have motored the country's economic development in the 1990s and after.

Finally, Philip Gounev and Tihomir Bezlov provide an account of the stolen car market in Bulgaria, a market that was largely unknown before the early 1990s in Bulgaria (and other countries in the Balkans), and a market that has been relatively under-researched in an international level, with some notable exceptions. In their article, Gounev and Bezlov provide a historical account that help us identify the important trajectories of the particular market as well as assist us in having “a specific angle of looking at Bulgaria’s transition to democracy” (Gounev and Bezlov, this issue). The article pays attention to the demand-and-supply factors that have shaped the market since the early 1990s, as well as the regulatory factors that have facilitated the business, which not only affected the size of the market but also its very nature. Gounev and Bezlov’s article fits well with Tzvetkova’s article since a large part of the stolen car market was operated by the *silovi grupirovki*.

This special issue also includes excerpts from two relevant reports, namely Anastasijevic’s report on ‘Organised Crime in the Western Balkans’ and UNICRI’s report titled ‘The Fight Against Organised Crime in Serbia’. As it will be apparent to the reader (and as is a relatively common feature in special issues), there is little similarity among the articles that follow in terms of structure. However, many of the issues that emerge out of this special issue highlight, in our opinion, the similarities among the different localities within the wider area of the Balkans with the common history and experiences, and simultaneously justify and reinforce our rationale for having a special issue on ‘Illegal Markets in the Balkans’.

What appears to be a first common feature in all articles is the difficulty researchers face in measuring the *extent* of the illegal markets, something that is immersed into conceptual, political and technical issues (see Thoumi, 2003). The nature of illegal markets –being the product of prohibitions and regulations-, ‘dark figure’, and underreporting prevent us from direct measurement, and the inability or even unwillingness on the part of state and international agencies to monitor as well the unavailability of functional and meaningful data, contribute to the inaccurate quantification of these illegal markets. In some cases and for certain illegal markets, such as the arms market, it is the inaccurate quantification of the legal market that contributes to the problem (see Naylor, 1995).

A series of other issues have to do with the *nature* of illegal markets. According to police, journalistic and politicians’ accounts several large, ‘dangerous’, ‘hierarchical’ ‘mafias’ originate from and conduct business in the Balkans (and other contexts). These so-called ‘mafias’ are *defined* by their ethnicity and their Balkan origin; the ‘Albanian mafia’, the ‘Yugo mafia’, the ‘Bulgarian mafia’ and so on, profiting from numerous illegal markets without however, there being a clear view as to the social organisation and political economy of these markets. It becomes evident that illegal markets are highly fragmented, (large) hierarchical structures are hardly the rule in illegal business (see von Lampe, 2008), and ethnicity is overestimated as a variable. These features, fragmentation, loose, horizontal networks and (ethnic) heterogeneity are extremely beneficial and functional characteristics for successful illegal marketers, who react and adapt to legal developments introduced by the “most predominant market actor, the state” (van Duyne, 2007a: 46), and are –in this way – in possession of strategic advantages over law enforcement agencies. For instance, according to Tzvetkova (this issue) the *silovi grupirovki* were effective in their car-

related business exactly because of their “criminally exploitable ties” (von Lampe, 2003: 10) all over the country, which allowed them to counterbalance any information asymmetries and mobilise a variety of resources. In addition, what is evident in this issue is that illegal markets are hardly monopolistic, an image that goes hand-in-hand with the perception of (large) hierarchical organisations ‘ruling’ the businesses. Depending on the commodity or the service at stake some illegal markets are oligopolies and some other perfectly competitive.

Contrary to popular depiction of illegal markets as violent settings, illegal markets often appear to have catalytic *peacemaking qualities* too, since they are the only context in which there is a smooth ‘collaboration’ of individuals from ethnic groups, who would otherwise be involved in conflicts. The United Nations’ sanctions against Serbia in the 1990s during the war in the former Yugoslavia, for instance, led to the establishment of big smuggling businesses providing a wide variety of commodities and services even to the enemy (see Andreas, 2004; Arsovska and Kostakos, this issue). According to Anastasijevic’s article (excerpt in this issue), there has also been collaboration of conflicting ethnicities in the drug trade. Finally, illegal markets seem to be the context of ‘convergence’ between consumers-members of the public who are otherwise isolated in their own ethnic or religious enclaves. The ‘Arizona Market’ in the Brčko district at the intersection between Bosnian, Croatian and Serbian territory, for instance, initially emerged as a versatile illegal market in the mid-1990s and has been described as “a model for all multi-ethnic communities in the region” (Mörtenböck and Mooshammer, 2007: 83). In a similar vein, a Greek journalist reporting on the (illegal) sex market in the area of Thrace in Northern Greece writes: “For the first time orthodox Greeks, Muslims and Pomaks were dancing together while drunk... in the dense forest of mountainous Rodopi... where huge bars were built very quickly” (Roumeliotis, 2008).

According to politicians and some economists, entrepreneurship theorists and criminologists, illegal markets and the informal economy in general constitute an effective impediment to sustainable social and economic development (and national security), and are the cause of many ‘social ills’. This is partly true. For instance, the cigarette black market deprives states of millions in taxes, which could possibly be invested in education or health. Moreover, the assassination industry in Serbia, the infrastructure for which existed long before the collapse of the former Yugoslavia and was used by the then political elite, attempts at hampering processes of institutional reform (Fatić, 2003). The assassination of the Serbian Prime Minister, Zoran Đinđić, by the Zemun gang in 2003 is one such example (see also UNICRI excerpt, this issue). Heavily armed groups with ethnic visions may affect power balances and can, therefore, constitute an obstacle to national/regional stability (see Arsovska and Kostakos, this issue). In addition, legal markets are often manipulated by illegal marketers. The extent to which illegal markets constitute obstacles or ‘threats’ to development, however, is extremely difficult to determine. Although a number of women are victimised in the sex industry, as is also shown by Papanicolaou (this issue) and Anastasijevic (this issue), and the stolen car market in Bulgaria involves a predatory element, namely, the actual stealing of a car (Gounev and Bezlov, this issue), there is evidence to support the view that some illegal markets and their dynamics assist people to pass by or live better, by allowing them to have access to commodities and services, and by opening a window of entrepreneurial opportunity to the disadvantaged. Illegal markets also act as a lubricant for stagnating economies that the weak, formal, (transitional) economies inefficiently – if at all – support. Illegal markets are pragmatic responses to real needs. This is particularly the case with illegal

markets of commodities and services that are ‘legal’, needed and are not, therefore, socially condemned, although there are cases in which socially condemned illegal markets have had their positive effect of certain Balkan societies. For instance, after the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia, smuggling was essential for the Serbs to counterbalance the embargoes (UNICRI excerpt, this issue); the health care and education in Kosovo depended -to a great extent- on revenues generated from drug trafficking; in Bulgaria many enterprises were dependent on mass smuggling (Hajdinjak, 2002); and illegal markets were the only survival means in post-war Bosnia (Pugh, 2002). In addition, as is evident in Arsovska and Kostakos’ contribution, the smuggling of arms through officially set and/or supported schemes was essential for the survival of Croatian and Bosnian armies that were fighting against the better equipped military apparatus of the Serbs. The ‘illegality’ of these illegal markets was, for the actors concerned, only an irrelevant technicality, and illegal marketers –although they accumulated wealth that significantly affected their social status - were revered as heroic entrepreneurs and “defenders of endangered national interests” (UNICRI report excerpt, this issue).

Sometimes illegal markets can be assisting in the recovery of parallel or relevant, declining, *legal* markets in contrast to popular depiction of legal markets as ‘victims’ of their illegal counterparts. For example, in the article by Papanicolaou (this issue) it is shown how the business of trafficking women for the commercial exploitation of their sexuality in Greece, although it was partly based on the victimisation of a number of women primarily from Eastern Europe, directly or indirectly sustained night-time economy establishments of a varied size throughout the country and thus contributed to the economy as a whole. *What this special issue highlights is that the economy is in essence one and undivided.* Formal and informal economies (of which illegal markets are an indispensable feature) operate within the same socio-economic environment, they are inevitably interdependent and the moral binary between the legal and the illegal (in the Balkans and even outside this area) satisfies political objectives or is often largely philological in nature. Given that the formal and informal economy, the legal and the illegal, encompass a number of common features (Castells and Portes, 1989), a market is ‘illegal’ because it is ‘defined’ as such by the state and the particular interests vested in it. Actors in the economic nexus are interdependent too and what can be observed is that (legal) capital can function (and perhaps more successfully) in an illegal setting, and in the same way illegal marketers benefit from the legal/legitimate sector. In addition, some legal businesses and state conveyors, which drift between legal and illegal practices, also benefit from illegal markets in various ways in this largely symbiotic relationship. Were we to put aside moral and political sensibilities for a moment, and to realise that the driving logic of the market is essentially amoral, it would appear that “illegal markets are not the realm of sinister, evil forces but dynamic interactive places in which criminal entrepreneurs meet the demands of many ordinary usually law-abiding citizens” (van Duyne, 2003: 2). In this dynamic environment that is illegal markets, transactions and benefits are always multilateral.

The final issue that emerges is the role of culture as an important dynamic of illegal markets, and of illegal markets (as a whole) as culturally-rooted phenomena. Arsovska and Kostakos’ article, for instance, highlights the importance of firearms in the Albanian culture as a factor that feeds demand and sabotages disarmament initiatives. Differential prices among various jurisdictions and economic variables alone, therefore, do not always tell the (whole) truth about illegal markets of specific commodities; instead it is the unique cultural and social context of the area of the

Balkans itself, or specific pockets of the area, that provides the fertile ground for the establishment and consolidation of certain illegal markets. The informal economy as a whole, and illegal markets in particular, have always been socio-culturally (and historically) relevant. The viability of illegal markets as this is also expressed by pragmatic needs and demand, and the rationality of (illegal) entrepreneurs as well as the neutralisation of their business has always been depended upon socio-cultural characteristics of the underworld (see Franičević, 1999).

All authors in this issue, in various degrees of explicitness, attest to the fact that the evolution of illegal markets, irrespectively of the commodity at stake, is forged by the economic, legal, social and cultural context of the Balkans. They, therefore, emphasize that illegal markets must be viewed as a social *process* in which the criminal and the legal, the financial and the political, the ‘underworld’ and the ‘upperworld’, can hardly be separated. The Balkans have gone through noteworthy social and economic circumstances that make it an imperative that researchers focus more closely on the particular region. Rather than simply put the Balkan context in the research and political “Procrustean bed” (van Duyne, 2007b: 124) of ‘organised crime’, there emerges an opportunity to enrich theorising about illegal markets and ‘organised crime’. Smith (2004: 10) has argued that “...there is an increasing need for highly diverse countries to learn more about one another...” when it comes to crime and justice, and the Balkans can certainly contribute to that direction. There is a need for the academic community to acknowledge and take into account the distinct nature of illegal markets in the Balkans, which is embedded in the region’s extraordinary histories and circumstances.

The contributors to this special issue highlight, directly or indirectly, the geographical identification of the Balkans as a West-East crossroads in illegal markets, ‘organised crime’ and other spheres of life. However, this special issue moves beyond the East-West discourse, and attempts at filling the gaps of international literature on some specific illegal markets in the Balkans, it clarifies issues about the structure of the markets and the changing patterns of collaboration within markets as well as focuses –to an extent- on responses to these markets. The Balkans has been a unique, idiosyncratic area, a mosaic of “neo-liberal states... zones of sovereign exemption, tax havens, pirate states, failed states, state of lawlessness...” (Klimov, n.d.:1) that, by using Sloane (1914) and King’s (2005) metaphors, can be characterised as a ‘laboratory (for the study) of illegal markets’. As this special issue comprises articles written by researchers/authors *from* the Balkans, it will usefully contribute to the discussion on illegal markets and ‘organised crime’ in this troubled corner of the world (and beyond), and the effort of a further internationalisation of the ‘academic/research market’ (van Duyne, 2008) on illegal markets.

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